



A NEW MOM'S NEW HEART

WHEN A 27-YEAR-OLD'S
HEART BEGAN TO
FAIL, ONLY A TRANSPLANT
COULD SAVE HER

DOCTORS MAY NEVER KNOW EXACTLY why Tasha Sinsapaugh's heart began to fail a few weeks after she gave birth to her first child, Jonathan, last September 24, but they did what they needed to do when she was stricken, and that's why she's alive today.

Sinsapaugh, 27, a Saugerties resident, had a normal pregnancy. But seven weeks after she gave birth, she began experiencing shortness of breath, especially when lying down. Concerned for her health, Sinsapaugh went to a nearby Kingston hospital, where doctors ran tests, suspected a respiratory infection and put her on antibiotics. Things got worse by Thanksgiving—symptoms now included episodes of chronic vomiting. When she tried to celebrate with little Jonathan and his father, Sperling Mark, she recalls, "I couldn't even eat our turkey dinner." Back to the local emergency room she went.

This time tests indicated gallstones, and Sinsapaugh was scheduled for surgery to remove them. An electrocardiogram, taken as part of normal preoperative screenings, found cardiomyopathy—an enlarged and weakened heart muscle. Additional tests showed that Sinsapaugh's heart was working at only 10 to 15 percent of capacity. Ali Hammoud, M.D., the cardiologist assigned to her case (and now on staff at Westchester

Medical Center), knew she needed a facility with more expertise and equipment than he had available. Dr. Hammoud immediately contacted Westchester Medical Center. Sinsapaugh was transferred there, and doctors put her on intravenous medications to assist her damaged heart.

"Her symptoms were consistent with peripartum cardiomyopathy, a rare disorder that affects new moms during pregnancy or soon after delivery," says Alan L. Gass, M.D., Medical Director of Cardiac Transplant Patient and Mechanical Circulatory Support. "This is caused by an immune-system reaction between the mother's heart and the child." Most of these patients' hearts recover, but occasionally—as in Sinsapaugh's case—the condition progresses until the patient requires a heart transplant.

She was getting a lot sicker, and peripartum cardiomyopathy was eventually confirmed. On December 7, she was placed on the waiting list for a heart transplant.

Sinsapaugh says she remained calm throughout the ordeal. "I was surprised, but not scared," she says. "That was because the doctors at Westchester Medical Center were all calm. I trusted them."

As it turned out, Sinsapaugh had to wait less than two weeks for a match to be found. She was fortunate that her youth and her common blood type (O positive)

made her an optimal candidate. Her small body size, too, helped make a wide range of donor hearts suitable for her.

On December 19, David Spielvogel, M.D., Program Director of Heart Transplantation, performed Sinsapaugh's heart transplant at Westchester Medical Center. "The quick timing was important," he says. "Although the medical center has interim treatments that can often see a very sick patient through to a transplant, her life was truly in danger." It was apparent that she had only days left at best.

"Because of her young age and generally good health, Tasha has an excellent long-term prognosis," says Dr. Gass.

"I'm feeling great now," says Sinsapaugh. Today she is grateful for her dramatically restored health and is busy being a new mom. "Now I can pick up my baby and carry him around," she reports happily. —D.L.



Alan L. Gass, M.D.



David Spielvogel, M.D.

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